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Col. Lucien Conein in Vietnam in 1965. Behind him, in the prow of the boat, is Daniel Ellsberg.

The Colonel's Secret Drug War

By George Crile III

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IN JANUARY, 1975, Sen. Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) charged that a senior official of the Drug Enforcement Administration had been offered and had examined a consignment of exotic assassination devices. The instruments included exploding telephones, flashlights and cameras, and came complete with triggering mechanisms set to movement, time, pressure, light or sound. Their only conceivable use was for anonymous murder.

Col. Lucien Conein, the official Weicker named, was not in a position to directly deny the senator's assertions. For one thing, Weicker produced a memo from the now defunct B.R. Fox Co. of Alexandria that seemed to implicate Conein in the company's decision to produce the devices for his consideration. Nevertheless, Conein managed to convince reporters that there was nothing more to the incident than the unsolicited mischief of the B.R. Fox Co. He *had* gone to look at some eavesdropping devices that he was thinking of buying for DEA when, much to his surprise, he was shown strange weapons which he hadn't asked to see and had no intention of buying.

The story made the network news, but with Conein's explanation the matter was dropped, and nothing more has been heard on the subject.

Had it been any other Washington official, this explanation might have sufficed. But Col. Conein is no ordinary bureaucrat. It seems incredible that there was no reaction to the discovery that the man examining the exploding devices was the same Col. Lucien Conein who had been the CIA's notorious Far Eastern operative and the only figure associated with President Nixon's former team to go on to become a senior official of the Ford administration.

A Legendary Career

IT WOULD have been difficult to imagine a more disturbing appointment than that of Lucien Conein to almost any post of responsibility in the government, much less his appointment to a highly sensitive position involving the most delicate covert operations. In earlier days the French used to offer two medical degrees: one requiring many years of school, internship and residency, and the other calling for an intensive 18-month program. The short-course doctors were not permitted to practice in France but they were given full license to operate in the Orient. The latter is the kind of license the CIA gave Lou Conein. It all but read on his Agency contract: "For Use in the Far East Only."

Conein's history is by now laced with legend but the following appears to be a reasonable summary of his exploits before joining the Nixon White House in 1971:

At the age of 17 Conein is said to have fled his hometown in Kansas to join the French Foreign Legion. With the entry of the United States into World War II he transferred to the Office of Strategic Services in France, where he lived and fought with the Corsican Brotherhood, who were then part of the Resistance. Before he left, Conein says, they made him a member — an honor to bear in mind, for the Brotherhood is an underworld organization deeply involved in the drug trade and considered even more effective and dangerous than its Sicilian counterpart, the Mafia.

After the liberation, Conein parachuted into Vietnam to join an OSS team fighting the Japanese alongside the Vietminh. There he met Ho Chi Minh and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap. A decade later, in 1954, he was back in Vietnam as one of Gen. Edward Lansdale's special team, charged with setting up a paramilitary organization in the Hanoi area. He helped Ngo Dinh Diem consolidate his power in South Vietnam the next year and in 1963 he was the U.S. embassy's liaison with the cabal of generals who murdered Diem.

Although he has been accused of engineering the assassination, his actual role seems to have been as the Kennedy administration's only direct conduit to the coup's plotters. He had occupied this sensitive position almost by default. He was married to a Vietnamese and he alone among the Americans was intimate with most of the Vietnamese high command. No one else had anything resembling his access to and familiarity with the Vietnamese style of doing business.

Even so, the CIA considered him an unstable commodity and sent him back to Washington. But he soon managed to return as part of an elite 10-man counterinsurgency team under Gen. Lansdale which also included Daniel Ellsberg, then still a war hawk.

It was Conein's past association with Ellsberg and his involvement in Diem's overthrow that brought him to the attention of the White House in 1971. His contact was E. Howard Hunt, an OSS colleague in World War II. Hunt had just begun working with Charles Colson, who was intent both on destroying Ellsberg's reputation and discrediting President Kennedy (and thus Sen. Edward Kennedy, then thought Nixon's most formidable political rival). One of Colson's hopes was to cast responsibility for Diem's assassination onto President Kennedy himself.

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Conein's career was then in a tailspin. He had left the CIA in 1968 and had persuaded a group of past associates to back him in a surplus war trading venture in Vietnam. By 1970 he had lost all of his and his investors' money and was back in Washington, drinking heavily and without much hope for the future. It was at this point that he was recruited by Howard Hunt.

Conein didn't offer anything of interest to help the White House undermine Ellsberg's reputation but he quickly ingratiated himself with Colson by providing NBC with an interview on the Saigon coup that tied the Kennedy administration far closer (in knowledge, at least) to that bloody event than before.

With this entre, he was soon asked to give his opinion on how Bud Krogh and his crew of eager young lawyers working with the Plumbers in Room 16 might go about waging the campaign against drugs just launched by the President.

Operation Diamond

IT IS GENERALLY assumed that the roots of Watergate are to be found in the creation of the Plumbers to investigate national security leaks. But it was Nixon's desperate drive against the country's drug epidemic which disclosed to his political operatives what secret resources were available for their use and how to tap them.

To the new President, the country in 1969 seemed to be dissolving irretrievably into disorder. Drugs may only have been a symptom of a deeper ailment, but seen from the White House they were the critical problem from which so many other troubles flowed.

Nixon was so adamant about cutting off the poison that in 1971 he declared drugs the country's number one problem and appointed Egil Krogh as his personal aide to direct a federal war against narcotics directly from the White House.

By the time Conein appeared, Krogh and his young aides were desperate to come up with results for their demanding chief. They had concluded that conventional approaches to drug enforcement were useless to deal with the realities of the international narcotics trade. The problems were everywhere — not the least being that foreign governments, or at least high foreign officials, were themselves so often part of the trafficking.

Krogh's staff was equally frustrated by the reluctance of the FBI and particularly the CIA to join it. J. Edgar Hoover had known that drugs would be a corrupting influence on his agents and kept out of it. The CIA was every bit as reluctant. From Thailand to Turkey to the Caribbean, those same people smuggling drugs were also useful sources of information on the flow of weapons, revolution and international intrigue. The federal drug effort asked that these traffickers be put out of business; the CIA wanted to maintain flexibility to gather intelligence. Conein, then, was just the man Krogh and his aides were looking for: a man of the world — albeit a very special world — who understood the other side and knew how to fight it.

It is uncertain precisely what part Conein played in

the ensuing White House programs; it can only be pointed out that some of them were so sensitive that they required the approval of Henry Kissinger's 40 Committee; others appear to have stretched so far over the boundaries of legality that they were undertaken in total secrecy.

One of these was Operation Diamond, the elaborate clandestine organization that Bernard Barker was organizing in Miami for Howard Hunt. Barker recruited almost 200 former CIA Cuban agents and organized them into specialized units for future operations. They included intelligence and counterintelligence groups and a street-fighting arm, Cubans who had brawled for the Agency at Communist and anti-Communist rallies across Latin America. And there was a particularly sensitive sector known as the Action Teams — an old CIA term for units with paramilitary skills including demolition and assassination.

Barker says that Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy talked about a number of other operations being organized at that time for similar purposes — Ruby, Opal, Crystal, Sapphire. Much later he was told that they were part of a larger, White House-coordinated program called Gemstone. Much of what Liddy would ultimately propose to John Mitchell in his famous $1 million plan of political subversion was taken from the Diamond plan that Barker drafted. Hunt assured Barker that the action squads would ultimately be turned against Fidel Castro; in the meantime, they would be used in the presidential campaign and then as special soldiers in the international drug war.

Watergate, one might think, should have called a halt to such extralegal plans for narcotics enforcement; instead it seems that the President merely put a bureaucratic face on a guerrilla war. Immediately after the break-in, John Ehrlichman and Krogh arranged for Conein to be transferred out of the White House to a consulting job with the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. Then, a year later, on July 1, 1973, Nixon consolidated all of the previously quarrelling bureaucracies dealing with narcotics into the Drug Engorcement Administration; and in November, attracting little attention in a city obsessed with talk of impeachment, Lucien Conein was appointed head of DEA's newly formed Special Operations Branch: his job, to create worldwide intelligence networks — both inside and outside the United States — to identify and ultimately to put a stop to the work of the major drug traffickers.

"I'll Tell You Anything"

MORE THAN ONE CIA official's bewilderment has bordered on alarm when he learned that Lucien Conein had been given a supervisory position over narcotics: "God save us all," said Peer De Silva, who was Conein's boss as Saigon station chief after the Diem assassination. "You've got to start with the premise that Lou Conein is crazy. He worked for me in Vietnam, if work is the word. He was certifiable at that point, I think." But he was useful: "The Agency does not deal with vicars of the church exlusively. We have all kinds of villains and rogues involved as well as heroes. You've got Lou Coneins and a whole lot of other people who serve their purpose. And within reason, if you keep them under control, people like him can do things other people cannot do. And that's how they survive . . ."

On a slow day, Conein is often found at Tony's or the Class Reunion bar and restaurant, a few blocks from DEA's offices, drinking beer and telling stories with a bunch of old OSS, CIA and DEA friends. Conein talks only occasionally but dominates these gatherings. He sits all but motionless save for his compulsive smoking and quaffing from a beer bottle that looks quite small in his thick paw. He has the look of a graying grizzly bear, but a better image might be that of a gnarled tree that has been struck more than once by lightning and has survived. You're sure there would be scars all over his body, if you were to want to look. Two fingers are missing, lost no doubt in some far-off land; the others seem clawed.

Robert Vesco at his Costa Rican estate.

Conein does not mind questions from reporters. On this occasion, he growls menacingly that he has been on to his visitor's inquiries about him. He then gives his stock prefatory remark: "I'll tell you anything you want to hear but it's probably not the truth."

Even with this unusual qualification, whatever the chief of DEA's Special Operations Branch says on the subject of drugs is necessarily of interest, particularly when he starts off with the flat declaration that he would never dream of mounting operations against one of the chief sources of narcotics traffic — the Corsicans. "You can get killed that way," he explains. "I will not talk about the Corsicans, period. I happen to be a member of the Corsican Brotherhood."

"Let me tell you something," he goes on in a voice that makes you strain to listen. "When the Sicilians put out a contract, it's usually limited to the continental United States or maybe Canada or Mexico, but with the Corsicans it's international. They'll go anywhere. There's an old Corsican proverb: 'If you want revenge and you act within 20 years, you're acting in haste.' It wouldn't just be me. They'd take it out on my children and maybe even some grandchildren. This is the code."

Amazingly he adds that he would also be wary of running operations against the CIA's old Cuban agents in Miami, a number of whom have gone into the drug trade. He compares them with the Corsicans, whose effectiveness he attributes to their training and experience with the French intelligence services: "The Cubans have received all the tradecraft from the Agency. If they could get into Cuba to raise hell, they can sure as hell get into the U.S. with drugs."

The problem in trying to move against such adversaries, he explains, is that "we have no cover as far as breaking laws and after this damn Church Committee we'll have even less. You can't do it because 12 or 13 years later maybe you'll have to stand up there with your balls exposed."

Drinking beer with Lou Conein, one is given the impression of a man who knows too much about the ways of the world to bother with trying to stop the unstoppable. Readily he agrees with a suggestion that there is simply too much money to be made in the drug trade for governments to be able to curtail it. A pretty teenage girl in a short red skirt comes in asking for directions and Conein adopts a philosophical tone. He talks of living every day as fully as you can. "I figure I've got 4,000 more broads to screw," he says as he orders another beer, and another. Why would anyone want to use drugs anyway when there is all that beer to be drunk?

It is difficult not to be charmed by this legendary rogue and it is senseless to become disturbed by misleading or even devious statements when he begins by telling you not to believe anything he says. But the allegations about his activities at DEA are deadly serious.

Recruits From CIA

THE CREATION of Conein's Special Operations Branch stemmed from the Nixon administration's insistence that DEA move away from its "buy and bust" approach, which yielded only small-time traffickers, and create a CIA-styled intelligence capability to identify and then eliminate the major suppliers. There would be a new intelligence service parallel to the traditional Enforcement Division. The man assigned to run the new division, George Belk, was a long-time Federal Bureau of Narcotics veteran whose tough drug enforcement operation in Detroit had caused his office to inherit the Detroit Mafia's old nickname, the "Purple Gang." Belk was enthusiastic to a fault, but he had no experience in intelligence and thus relied heavily on Conein for guidance in creating what he hoped would become an intelligence empire.

The initial problem was that none of the personnel available were trained to organize and run professional intelligence operations. A number of retired or active CIA men had been recruited in 1972 and 1973 — the figure may now run as high as 100. But none of these original recruits were operatives; they were analysts or functionaries. What Belk and Conein wanted were men capable of establishing intelligence nets to cover entire regions of the world and they asked the CIA if it could spare any of its operatives. Conein wanted about 50 but settled for 12.

The Agency was more than happy to provide DEA with some of its men, for it very much wanted to get out of the narcotics work forced on it by the White House. The CIA was then being drastically cut back and when word was spread of the opportunities for advancement with the new drug agency a number of operatives were interested. The first recruits were told they would be sent overseas with the approximate responsibility of a station chief. Of the 12 accepted none had known Conein. They all transferred expecting a quick rise to the top of a new and growing service; all soon bitterly regretted the move.

Their problems began immediately as most DEA officials resented and suspected the 12 new men before they had even arrived. Two years before, the chief of BNDD had been so distressed by his agency's corruption that he had the CIA detail him 19 agents to ferret it out. Their subsequent success alienated them from many at DEA and even managed to cast suspicion over the other CIA veterans who joined the new drug agency.

All kinds of problems flowed from the arrival of Conein's recruits in early 1974. The main difficulty stemmed from the bitter attempts of the enforcement division to sabotage the growth of the new intelligence branch. Enforcement even tried to get the operatives assigned to its division. Conein finally directed his men not to come to the DEA office until the matter was straightened out. He had them go instead to a "safe house" he had acquired for DEA through an old OSS and CIA friend.

A safe house is the CIA's name for a place where agents can go in secret: this one was a two-story apartment in the La Salle building at 1028 Connecticut Ave. NW, half a block from the Mayflower Hotel. Conein told his men that the apartment had formerly been operated by the CIA. Actually — as we shall see later — its identity is more mysterious than that.

It was reportedly in this apartment that Conein and his deputy, Searl (Bud) Frank, examined the B. R. Fox assassination devices. Reporters accepted Conein's assurances that he had not expected to be shown the equipment. But according to two senior DEA officials, Conein knew precisely what B. R. Fox's representatives planned

to show him that day. More important, they claim that he had already developed plans to employ them.

"When you get down to it," explained one of the officials, "Conein was organizing an assassination program. He was frustrated by the big-time operators who were just too insulated to get to . . . He felt we couldn't win, the way things were going."

According to these officials, meetings were held to decide whom to target and what method of assassination to employ. Conein then assigned the task to three of the former CIA operatives detailed to the Connecticut Avenue safe house.

The men he chose were former paramilitary case officers with the Agency's Special Operations Division who had run commando raids into North Vietnam. The DEA officials described them as first-generation Americans, "very young and patriotic and a little naive. They were troubled by the assignment but they trusted Conein because he had been with the CIA. They counted on him not to put them in a compromising situation."

The program was to begin in Mexico. Conein reportedly had his men prepare operational plans to determine the feasibility of killing a number of Mexican traffickers with sophisticated exploding devices. For several months in 1974 the three, working directly under Conein, traveled back and forth to Mexico. After preparing their initial plans he had them identify a number of Mexicans to be recruited to carry out the actual murders.

According to these accounts, at least one Mexican was recruited as an assassination agent. The man had grown up in a border town with a number of major traffickers and had become a DEA informant after being arrested on a drug charge. In exchange for murdering his old friends, the DEA agreed to help him become a legal resident of the United States.

The alleged plan was apparently ready to begin by the beginning of 1975 when Sen. Weicker made his public charge. One of the operatives had already questioned Conein on the legality of his assignment. Now, all three reportedly rebelled and told Conein they would not participate any further.

"Those three have since been dispatched to the four winds, to jobs far from Washington," said one of the DEA officials. "They are bitter about how they were used and very afraid of repercussions."

Conein, in a burst of four-letter words, denied any involvement in such a program. "That is a big __ lie. That is bull__." He said he knew who the sources were and that they were the ones who should be investigated, but he refused to identify them or to offer any reason why they should not be believed. "Go ahead and print it," he said twice. "I don't care." One reason he offered to rebut the story was that he never had anything to do with any programs in Mexico.

Conein's supervisor, George Belk, now retired, offered a different version of Conein's activities. He said that Conein and several of his agents from the Connecticut Avenue safe house had been working on a program involving Mexico in 1974. But he said he did not know of any plan for DEA to assassinate anyone. "We were trying to determine ways and means by which they [the major drug traffickers] could be immobilized by the Mexican government. ...The idea was to identify the Mexicans who were known to be operating... to collect intelligence to be passed on to the attorney general's office for action by their government." He stressed that there was no extralegal activity taking place.

When asked once again about the reported assassination program, Belk replied: "That may have been somebody's concept but nothing ever came of it. As a matter of fact, nothing ever happened."

Wer Bell and Vesco

APPARENTLY CONEIN'S program did not result in any deaths but its implications become even more provocative when his relationship to the manufacturer of the exploding devices is considered. News accounts describe the B. R. Fox Co. as a short-lived firm run out of an Alexandria home by an electronics engineer and a housewife. There was no explanation as to why Conein had chosen to buy sophisticated wiretapping equipment from such an obscure firm.

The explanation is to be found in the identity of the actual figure behind the B. R. Fox Co. and its arrangements with Conein — Mitchell Livingston Wer Bell III. Wer Bell is one of the world's most successful inventors and manufacturers of silencers and such exotic lethal weapons as a cigar that fires a single bullet and a swagger stick that doubles as a rocket launcher. But, most important in this context, he is one of Conein's old OSS friends and, according to staff members on the Senate Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, a business partner of Conein's at least as recently as 1974.

In an interview, Wer Bell disarmingly acknowledged a recent business relationship with Conein. Further, he proudly asserted that he had worked with Conein to provide DEA with assassination devices and that the B. R. Fox Co. had even shared the same duplex apartment used by the DEA operatives as a safe house. (This fact is confirmed by the La Salle building's records.)

Conein's apparent use of Wer Bell for DEA operations seems all but incredible when the arms manufacturer's other activities in 1974 are taken into account. That spring, while Conein was readying his assassination program, Wer Bell was negotiating a bizarre arms deal with Robert Vesco, the fugitive swindler in Costa Rica. Wer Bell originally agreed to sell Vesco his entire stock of 2,000 silenced machine guns. But he was unable to get an export license and so the two reached a tentative agreement to build an Ingram submachine gun factory in Costa Rica. (The Ingram is the same weapon featured in the opening scenes of "Three Days of the Condor.")

These dealings were sufficiently menacing to draw the interest of Sen. Henry Jackson's Permanent Investigations Subcommittee. Jackson observed that Wer Bell's Ingrams are not the "normal military defense weapons. This is the kind of weapon . . . used for covert purposes . . . shall we say, mini-revolutions or coups or what have you."

Along with Wer Bell's arms deal, the Jackson subcommittee also investigated Vesco's "penetration" of the federal bureaucracy, and particularly the Drug Enforcement Administration. Here it found that the DEA had all but killed a promising investigation into charges by a government informer that Vesco was trafficking in heroin, and that it had then "lost" most of Vesco's file. Even more suspicious was the discovery that two of the nar-

Associated Press Photos

Mitchell Wer Bell III, arms merchant, in his Georgia home.

coucs agency's wiretap specialists had flown from Los Angeles to New Jersey to sweep Vesco's home and office for possible bugs.

The further the committee probed the entangling relations of Vesco, Wer Bell, Conein and the DEA, the more questions were raised. For one thing, Wer Bell was indicted in 1974, charged with conspiracy to smuggle large quantities of marijuana into the country, in a case yet to come to trial. The staff wanted to know the precise nature of his relationship with Conein.

They had already subpoenaed Conein, Belk and others to testify when suddenly the hearings were cancelled. If the staff members know why, they don't explain; but they also don't conceal their frustration. The decision was not theirs.

A Pandora's Box

THE RECENT congressional investigations into U.S. intelligence activities did not examine narcotics operations, and the President's new guidelines for all other intelligence agencies do not even address themselves to DEA operations. DEA is left more or less alone through its Inspection Division to regulate itself. It is hard to ex-

pect too much from this check: the man scheduled to be appointed to the number two spot in Inspection, Bud Frank, is Conein's former deputy. He was on hand that day two years ago to review the exploding devices.

A few months ago, the Justice Department, of which DEA is a branch, conducted an investigation into some of Conein's other operations (see box on opposite page). Two attorneys were assigned the task. After reading the report of their findings, the assistant attorney general concerned instructed them to tone down their conclusions. The attenuated final version was then attached to a general report on the intelligence division and strictly limited to three copies; one each for the attorney general, the assistant attorney general, and for Peter Bensinger, DEA's new administrator.

It is understandable that no administration would wish to take on Col. Conein. It is said that his closet is filled with skeletons from his days with the CIA, and that he has a lethal knowledge of where a great number of other bodies are buried.

But this alone does not explain the silence of the Ford Justice Department. It is unlikely that any investigation of Conein could help but result in a larger exploration of other past and present narcotics efforts and it would inevitably have to enter into the tangled world of Wer Bell and Vesco.

More than likely no one in the Ford administration even knew of Conein's presence at DEA — or knew anything about his activities — until recently. By now it probably knows more than it would prefer — apparently enough to avoid opening this potential Pandora's box in the midst of an election year.